

Article Two – The Transfer of Bishops in History

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In the first article in this series we considered one of the canons or rules which was formulated at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. This fifteenth canon forbade the transfer of one bishop to another see, and was especially enacted to prevent the disturbances associated with such movements of bishops. This canon was considered necessary to preserve the stability of the Church and continuity in the ministry of bishops. If bishops could be transferred then bishops might enviously set their sights on larger dioceses, and larger dioceses might set their sights on the most capable and well-known of bishops.

In this second article we will consider how this canon was put into practice in the years after the Council of Nicaea. By examining a variety of different cases we will be able to see that in fact the Church considered it necessary to follow this rule wherever and whenever it was practical, and even when there were what might have seemed good reasons to allow for the transfer of a bishop the Church decided that the canon should not be broken.

The first example is that of Eusebius the bishop of Caesarea. He is famous as being one of the first Church Historians, and he also composed a life of the Emperor Constantine shortly after his death in 337 AD. He had become the bishop of Caesarea in 313 AD, and played an important part in the Council of Nicaea. He was one of those who had supported the introduction of the fifteenth canon, forbidding the transfer of bishops. After the council of Nicaea he had the opportunity placed before him to be transferred to the much bigger and more important city of Antioch. In 330 AD, there was a theological argument in Antioch and the patriarch Eustathius was deposed. The patriarchal see was now vacant and many of the people of Antioch wanted Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, to become the patriarch.

Eusebius was a careful collector of important historical evidence, and in his life of the Emperor Constantine reproduces several imperial letters which deal with this situation. It had taken place only five years after the council of Nicaea and we can consider it a good test as to whether the Council actually meant to prohibit the transfer of bishops or not. In the first letter which Eusebius records, the Emperor is writing to the people of Antioch about their demand to have Eusebius as their bishop. He says..

On reading your records I perceived, by the highly praiseworthy testimony which they bear to Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, whom I have myself long well known and esteemed for his learning and moderation, that you are strongly attached to him, and desire to appropriate him as your own.... I myself highly esteem the individual whom you judge worthy of your respect and affection: notwithstanding, it cannot be right that those principles should be entirely disregarded which should be authoritative and binding on all alike, so that each should not be content with his own circumstances, and all enjoy their proper privileges.... we must say that you will be chargeable, not with retaining this prelate, but with wrongfully removing him; your conduct will be characterized rather by violence than justice.

These extracts from this first letter show us that the Emperor was well aware of the excellent qualities of Eusebius, but he insists that there are principles which cannot be disregarded when it

comes to the transfer of bishops, so that everyone should be satisfied with the responsibility they already have. Indeed he states that moving a bishop is a matter of violence and is something which is wrong and cannot be justified.

In his letter to Eusebius himself the Emperor writes...

I have most carefully studied your letter, and see that you have strictly conformed to the rule enjoined by the discipline of the Church.... your resolve to observe the ordinances of God and the apostolic canon of the Church, has done excellently well in declining the bishopric of the church at Antioch, and desiring to continue in that church of which you first received the oversight by the will of God.

We see here that Eusebius had indeed been offered the position of patriarch of Antioch, but with a constant adherence to the canon of the Church which forbids such transfers he had refused the offer. The Emperor commends him for observing the canon and remaining in the place where he had been made a bishop. There is a third letter, which was addressed to the bishop of the synod of Antioch who had also invited Eusebius to become their patriarch, and in this letter the Emperor says...

Now the letters of Eusebius himself on this subject appeared to be strictly accordant with the order prescribed by the Church... I am informed that Euphronius the presbyter, and George of Arethusa, likewise a presbyter, are men of tried faith...you will be able, according to the rule of the Church and apostolic tradition, to direct this election in the manner which true ecclesiastical discipline shall prescribe.

Here we see the Emperor reminding the bishops that they should have chosen a priest, or similar worthy person to become their patriarch, and that they should have followed Eusebius in his strict observance of the canon. He instructs them that if they do elect a simple priest as their bishop and patriarch then they will be following the rule of the Church and the apostolic tradition. It seems very reasonable indeed to conclude that this example, taking place just a few years after the Council of Nicaea itself, illustrates how the Emperor and the bishops who took part in the Council intended this rule to be understood.

Just a little later, in 381 AD, we find another example. On this occasion it is that of Gregory of Nazianzus, no less famous than Eusebius of Caesarea. The Council of Nicaea is now 50 years in the past, but we will see that there is still a great determination to observe the fifteenth canon without exception.

Gregory was the son of Gregory the Elder, Bishop of Nazianzus. His father was an important bishop in Asia Minor and rather a domineering character. Gregory was a friend of Basil, and part of that group of theologians who became known as the Cappadocians. Basil was very interested in the monastic life, and Gregory hoped to join him and live a life of prayer apart from the world. But his father had other intentions and forcefully ordained him as a priest. Gregory had no wish to hold any office in the Church, and in the description of his own life which he wrote much later he said that he considered this ordination an act of tyranny by his father. It was not the end of such experiences however.

His friend Basil was seeking to become Archbishop of Caesarea through various intrigues that Gregory found distasteful, but the defence of Orthodoxy led Gregory to exercise himself on behalf of Basil, writing on his father's behalf to various hierarchs encouraging the candidacy of Basil. When Basil had become Archbishop he found his authority threatened by the imperial elevation of the nearby city of Tyana, with an equally ambitious bishop. Basil's response was to consecrate many bishops for the small settlements around Caesarea so that he could bolster his own Synodal support.

Gregory had no wish to be caught up in such politics, but while supporting his father in Nazianzus he received a visit from Basil, who put him under great pressure, together with his father, to become a bishop. Gregory may well have considered that he would be acting as Basil's partner in Caesarea, but Basil had other plans and consecrated him as the bishop of a small village at a crossroads, which Gregory later described as,

An utterly dreadful, pokey little hole. A paltry horse-stop on the main road where it splits into three on its way through Cappadocia.

In fact Gregory was never able to be installed as bishop there. Not only did he not wish the episcopal rank, saying that he was never persuaded of the advisability of accepting the episcopate, but had been forced into it, but he was physically prevented from visiting the settlement. When he was being escorted there by Basil after his ordination they found the way blocked by supporters of Anthimos of Tyana, and he was forced to return to Nazianzus. He served his father as an assistant until he passed away, and then resisted all efforts by the populace to have him made their bishop, though he continued to minister to them until a new bishop was installed. Gregory describes this saying,

Though I can stand all things, there is one thing I cannot bear, and that is the anger of my father. First of all he agitated to have me installed at Sasima, and when he failed to secure this, he determined that the second best thing would be that I should not remain devoid of rank, but should rather assist him as his suffragan.

It seems clear that Gregory had not desired to be consecrated as bishop, and had not been installed as bishop of Sasima, otherwise his father would not have considered him 'devoid of rank'. Elsewhere indeed Gregory speaks of himself as a 'bishop without a see'. He found himself acting as assistant to his father, the Bishop of Nazianzus. In 379 AD, Theodosius became Emperor, and he supported Orthodoxy and so he looked around for a man to come to Constantinople to help the very small Orthodox community there. The heresy of Arianism still dominated the city, and the bishop was Demophilus, an Arian heretic. He looked after this community, and was a bishop in a general sort of way, but he was not the bishop of Constantinople, nor had he ever been the bishop of Nazianzus, where his father was bishop, nor had he ever been able to be received and enthroned in the tiny village of Sasima.

But in 381 AD a second Ecumenical Council was held, this time in Constantinople, and it was expected that Gregory would be elected the proper bishop of Constantinople, since Demophilus had refused to abandon his heresy and had been deposed. The council started well, but soon the elderly president of the council died, and Gregory found himself in the middle between various parties and factions. When the matter of his becoming bishop and patriarch of Constantinople was discussed there were many objections, especially from the bishops of Egypt. The history of this Council says

that it was because he had been at least consecrated bishop of Sasima, and had acted as bishop for his father at Nazianzus, that he was canonically ineligible to become bishop of Constantinople. Indeed the council is described as acting 'in strict obedience to the laws of the fathers and ecclesiastical order', and that there was 'no exception in favour of so eminent a man'.

Now it could certainly have been argued that he had never been able to become the bishop of Sasima, and had never been the bishop of Nazianzus, but even the support of the Emperor was not enough to overcome the objections to his becoming the patriarch, since the Council wished to act in strict accordance with 'ecclesiastical order'. It would seem reasonable to conclude that even 50 years after the Council of Nicaea the Church still considered that there should be no exceptions to the rule.

A third and final example can also be briefly considered. Proclus was a priest of Constantinople in the times of Nestorius. He had been a candidate for the episcopate but had not been successful, nevertheless the patriarch of the time consecrated him as bishop of the important city of Cyzicus. Unfortunately the patriarch did not have jurisdiction or authority over this city, and the people elected their own bishop, and so Proclus was never able to visit Cyzicus, or exercise any episcopal authority over it. He remained in Constantinople as a bishop without a see, and when the Third Ecumenical Council took place in Ephesus in 431 AD he did not participate since he was not a diocesan bishop.

He was passed over as bishop of Constantinople several more times, but eventually, in 434 AD, on the death of the patriarch of Constantinople, Proclus was consecrated bishop just hours later, and conducted his funeral. The Emperor already had a letter from the Pope of Rome indicating that there was no canonical problem with him becoming patriarch, and this letter was sent to the other patriarchs, although he had already been made bishop long before they could have received their copies. What is clear is that the Pope of Rome did consider the fifteenth canon of Nicaea to be important, but that he did not consider that Proclus had ever been the diocesan bishop of Cyzicus. Therefore Proclus is not an example of a diocesan bishop being transferred to another See, on the contrary, he is another example, over 100 years after Nicaea, of the fifteenth canon being considered important, but in this case not being applicable to Proclus.

These examples show how important canon fifteen was to the Church. Once it had been determined that there should not be transfers of bishops it became a rule that was not easily broken. These three cases are all famous men who could have been considered ideal material for the most senior positions, but one rejected any such transfer himself. Another was rejected as a candidate because it seemed to most bishops that he had indeed acted as a diocesan bishop elsewhere. While the third example is not a transfer of a bishop, when properly considered, because he had never been lawfully made bishop of the diocese chosen for him and had never acted as diocesan bishop.

The third article in this series will consider the history of the transfer of bishops over a much larger period of history to understand when and why some Orthodox Churches did begin to allow the transfer of bishops, and to show that the Church in Egypt always resisted such changes until very recent times.